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Summary record of the 10th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Thursday, 5 October 2000, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. Kelapile (Vice-Chairman) ..... (Botswana)
Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative And Budgetary Questions: Mr. Mselle

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The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

Agenda item 121: Pattern of conferences (*continued*) (A/54/849; A/55/32, A/55/134, A/55/182, A/55/259, A/55/410 and A/55/430; A/AC.172/2000/6)

1. **Mr. Kuindwa** (Kenya) said that Kenya had all along been very concerned about the under-utilization of the United Nations Office at Nairobi. At the fifty-third regular session it had highlighted the imbalance in the utilization rate of the Nairobi Office in comparison with the Offices at New York, Geneva and Vienna. The Group of 77 and China, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Group of African States, the European Union and various members of the Fifth Committee had also re-emphasized the need to remedy the situation. All those expressions of concern had culminated in the adoption of resolution 54/248 B, which mandated the Secretary-General to create an interpretation service at Nairobi.

2. In cooperation with the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), during the first half of 2000 the Nairobi Office had successfully hosted a series of major conferences — a clear demonstration that it had the requisite competence to host not only large events but also an increased number of conferences. Kenya was grateful to the regional offices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the United Nations Children's Fund, the International Civil Aviation Organization, and the International Centre for Research in Agroforestry for their support and cooperation.

3. His delegation called on the Secretary-General to ensure the speedy expansion and modernisation of the conference facilities at the Nairobi Office in order to attract more conferences and to be able to provide all the desired services. It also requested that all the vacant interpreter posts should be filled within the agreed time-frame, i.e. by January 2001, and that UNEP, Habitat, the Member States, intergovernmental bodies and regional groups should increase their use of the conference facilities at Nairobi, in compliance with the headquarters rule.

4. **Ms. Sun Minquin** (China) said that her delegation endorsed the statement made by Nigeria on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. Although the Secretary-General had endeavoured to improve the quality of documentation, it was still not satisfactory. In order to correct that situation it was necessary to establish a rigorous management system and incentives and disincentives to enhance the professionalism of staff members. The improvement of interpretation and translation should also be pursued further, for their inadequate quality had sometimes impeded delegations' work. Measures must be introduced to establish strict control over the recruitment of interpreters and translators and provide for the proper training of personnel in order to ensure that the services that they delivered were of top quality.

5. Her delegation took it that the relevant recommendations of the Secretariat on the late distribution of documents would quickly be put into practice. Documents were also too long, and both the Secretariat and the Member States must do everything possible to shorten the reports submitted by avoiding pointless repetitions and including only the most recent information.

6. The equal treatment of all the official languages of the Organization must be guaranteed, including in the maintenance and enhancement of the United Nations web sites. In that connection General Assembly resolution 54/249 provided that the temporary-assistance posts used for maintaining the pilot web sites in Arabic, Chinese and Russian should be converted into established posts.

7. The United Nations Office at Nairobi, the only headquarters office in a developing country, should stand on an equal footing with the other such offices, and its utilisation rate must therefore be increased. Her delegation welcomed the progress made in establishing a permanent interpretation service at Nairobi and in introducing new technology in the conference services. It hoped that that progress would not affect the delegations from developing countries or complicate their work.

8. **Mr. Zackheos** (Cyprus) said that his delegation aligned itself with the statement made by the representative of France on behalf of the European Union. Concise and timely documentation, effective interpretation, good coordination and sound planning were some of the salient factors contributing to successful meetings. In that connection it supported the Secretariat's ongoing efforts to improve the quality of conference services and endorsed the recommendations contained in the report of the Committee on Conferences.

9. His delegation commended the efforts of the Department of Public Information to bring in new technology while at the same time improving its use of traditional media. The growth of the United Nations web site was welcome but further improvements were needed, particularly in the search capability and the availability of official documents on line.

10. Cyprus shared the concern of small delegations concerning the scheduling of meetings in related sectors at dates close to each other and hoped that the situation would improve in 2001. It also supported further efforts to reduce the length of documents with a view to cost benefits, better management of time, and more effective participation by small delegations.

11. He recalled his own experience as Chairman of the Fourth Committee at the fifty-fourth session of the General Assembly and expressed the view that in order to achieve the coefficient of 80 per cent in the use of conference services members must be punctual and inscribe their delegations on the speakers' list ahead of time so as to facilitate planning. It would also be useful for them to indicate in advance the exact length of their statements.

12. His delegation once again urged the bodies concerned to take action to prevent the issuance as official documents of the United Nations of letters from the self-declared "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus", which were circulated systematically by the Turkish delegation. That was a totally unacceptable practice aimed at securing recognition of that territory as a State; it created a dangerous precedent and conflicted with the United Nations resolutions on Cyprus.

13. **Mr. Getachew** (Ethiopia) said that one significant step taken in 1999 to improve the utilisation of conference facilities had been the decision to create a permanent interpretation service in the United Nations Office at Nairobi. His delegation hoped that the unit would begin to function before the end of the current biennium.

14. Ethiopia welcomed the report of the Secretary-General on utilization of the United Nations conference centres at Bangkok and Addis Ababa (A/55/410), which explored ways of extending their use to activities other than the provision of services to the two regional commissions. However, as indicated in the draft revised calendar of conferences and meetings for 2001 (A/55/32, annex), only four of the 260 scheduled meetings had been allocated to the two centres. That clearly illustrated the need to promote the integration of the regional conference centres in the annual planning of conferences and meetings. His delegation nevertheless recognized that steps had been taken to improve the staffing and management of the centres and to finance promotional activities, and it was encouraging to note that the utilization statistics had begun to show some improvement in recent months.

15. The utilization rate of the Conference Centre at Addis Ababa had increased in comparison with the preceding period although the Centre still lacked adequate staffing and the financial resources necessary for marketing its facilities. The appointment of a new chief was a positive step, but more improvements should not be expected until the afore-mentioned problems had been solved. As was implied in paragraph 32 of the report, various divisions of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) itself were holding meetings away from the Conference Centre; that was an unacceptable practice which defeated the Centre's very purpose and should not be allowed to continue. However, the biggest problem was the lack of guidelines, as the report stated. It was quite ironic that the Organization had spent considerable resources to build the Centre yet still had no well defined and clearly articulated vision of its use for meetings of the United Nations and other entities. The General Assembly's invitation to the Secretary-General to devise new income-generating measures and the request of the Committee on Conferences that the Secretariat should prepare proposals on the use of the conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, including use by non-United Nations bodies, were applicable to the Addis Ababa Centre. His delegation thus concurred fully with the Secretary-General's conclusion in paragraph 42 of his report. It welcomed the efforts of the Centre's new chief to encourage the use of its facilities by other bodies, but if optimum use was to be made of the Centre it must be provided with sufficient personnel and resources.

16. In conclusion his delegation wished to clarify a point mentioned in paragraph 30 of the Secretary-General's report. The cancellation of various events scheduled for the Addis Ababa Conference Centre was not due to the hostilities in the region but to the unilateral actions of certain countries. It regretted that the report did not give the full picture of the situation, and urged the Secretariat to provide objective accounts

in future reports. However, it emphasized its appreciation of the report in general and endorsed its conclusions. Ethiopia would continue to cooperate with the Conference and General Services Division of ECA in its endeavour to increase the Centre's utilization.

17. **Ms. Marston** (Jamaica) said that her delegation welcomed the progress made in comparison with the preceding year. Important steps had been taken to improve the Organization's overall efficiency, thanks in part to closer cooperation between the Member States and the Secretariat. The General Assembly had provided clear guidelines which took into account the Secretariat's financial and logistical constraints. In carrying out its mandate the Secretariat had given examples of innovation and vision and it must continue to seek ways of coping on very limited resources without compromising the Organization's work and standards. Her delegation applauded the hard work done by the staff of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services, which ensured the smooth and efficient conduct of meetings and the dissemination of relevant information.

18. Jamaica called for the provision of full interpretation services for meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States and hoped for further progress that would enable all requests to be met. It was satisfied with the progress made towards creating a permanent interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Nairobi by January 2001. It was to be hoped that, with greater effort and less pessimism, all the obstacles could be overcome and more meetings held at Nairobi. The timely issuance of documents remained an unsolved problem. Compliance with the six-week rule for the distribution of documents was continuously advocated but rarely achieved. Jamaica fully supported the proposals put forward to address the problem.

19. **Mr. Lozinski** (Russian Federation) said that his delegation supported in general terms the conclusions and recommendations contained in the report of the Committee on Conferences (A/55/32). The optimum use of the Organization's conference-servicing resources was a complex task which required the collaboration of all the parties concerned on an agreed and balanced basis. Attention must be given to coordination among the various departments of the Organization and between the Secretariat and the Member States; the work done by the Committee on Conferences in that connection was welcome.

20. His delegation noted with satisfaction the increase in 1999 in the utilization of conference facilities at the main duty stations and hoped that the trend would continue. It welcomed the provision of interpretation services for 84 per cent of the meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States but it was in no doubt that the meetings of Charter and mandated bodies must be given priority.

21. The delays in the issuance of documents, mainly the fault of the substantive departments of the Secretariat, remained a ground for concern. The Committee itself had had to adjust its programme of work on various occasions for that reason. It was necessary to examine concrete means of solving the problem, for it had become a chronic one. His delegation was very conscious of the six-week rule although it knew that the rule could not always be applied in practice. The possibilities of rationalizing the use of resources were not infinite, and the action taken to solve the problem must be accompanied by flexibility on the part of the Member States. His delegation stressed once again that the measures taken to reduce the volume of documentation and rationalize conference services must not be discriminatory or work to the detriment of the equality of the official languages of the Organization.

22. His delegation was happy to note that the Secretariat had taken into account the arrangements referred to in paragraph 7 of General Assembly resolution 54/248 A, concerning Orthodox Good Friday, and that they had been reflected in the draft calendar of conferences. It requested the Secretariat always to keep the bodies concerned informed in good time about the provisions of that resolution.

23. **Mr. Kendall** (Argentina) said that his delegation appreciated the report of the Committee on Conferences and emphasized the importance of conference services for the proper functioning of the Organization. In general terms it endorsed the conclusions contained in the report. It welcomed the increase in the overall utilization rate of conference services in 1999 and in the services furnished to regional and other major groupings of Member States. It agreed with what the report had to say about the United Nations Office at Nairobi and looked forward with interest to the Secretary-General's reports on the start-up of the permanent interpretation service. It also believed that the measures to improve the coordination of conference services should be strengthened.

24. His delegation re-emphasized the need for documents to be circulated sufficiently in advance and regarded the proposals made by the Secretariat in document A/AC.172/2000/6 as a basis for the formulation of guidelines in the matter. It agreed with what the representative of the United States had said about the need to innovate. The introduction of new technology in conference services would work to the benefit of all the Member States; the possibilities offered by new technology should therefore be kept under review.

25. **Mr. Nakkari** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that his delegation attached the greatest importance to the exceptional multilingual nature of the Organization. It welcomed the improvement in the provision of interpretation services to regional and other major groupings of Member States but noted that the Secretariat did not comply with paragraph 11 of resolution 54/248 B, in which it had been decided to include in the budget for the biennium 2000-2001 all the resources needed for the provision of interpretation services for regional groupings, a point reflected in paragraph 41 of the report of the Committee on Conferences. The Secretariat should meet 100 per cent of the requests for such services.

26. With regard to remote interpretation, his delegation drew attention once again to what had been said at the fifty-fourth session of the General Assembly and during the discussion of the difficulties involved in that mode of interpretation, highlighted in the report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (A/55/430). It reaffirmed the provision contained in resolution 54/248 D that the matter should be kept under review by the General Assembly. As his delegation had stated previously, remote interpretation could be used only in limited cases, at world conferences for example, but it could not be considered a new mode of providing conference services.

27. Where information technology was concerned, his delegation welcomed the recommendation of the Committee on Conferences that the web sites should be fully enhanced in all the official languages and that timely budgetary provisions should be made; it noted that in its resolution 54/249 the General Assembly had stated that the three vacant posts for the web sites in Arabic, Russian and Chinese should be filled.

28. It was important for the creation of a permanent interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Nairobi pursuant to General Assembly resolution 54/248 B to be followed up, for that Office was located in a developing country. His delegation noted with satisfaction the content of paragraphs 17, 19, 23 and 24 of the report of the Secretary-General on improved utilization of conference facilities at the Nairobi Office (A/55/259) but did not accept the Secretariat's replies to the Advisory Committee's questions about the way in which the team of interpreters would be used at Nairobi, for it had been stated that one possible use was remote interpretation, which would be at variance with resolution 54/248 D, in which the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to keep under review the introduction of any new technology, in particular remote interpretation. The use of the team for remote interpretation would require the prior approval of the Assembly.

29. His delegation noted with interest paragraph 4 of the ACABQ report (A/55/430), which referred to the need to evaluate proposed reductions in temporary assistance in the light of persistent problems concerning the level and quality of translation and interpretation and timely publication of official documents.

30. It was satisfied with what the Secretariat had to say about paragraph 7 of General Assembly resolution 54/248 A, concerning Orthodox Good Friday.

31. At the fifty-fourth session of the General Assembly the Syrian delegation had raised the question of including in the Official Records of resolutions adopted by the General Assembly information on their adoption, such as voting records and sponsors, in the six official languages of the Organization; the point had been reflected in paragraph 3 of resolution 54/248 C. His delegation hoped that the Secretariat would confirm that that measure would be applied when the volumes of General Assembly resolutions were printed.

32. It also awaited a reply from the Secretariat concerning the fact that the invitation sent to delegations to attend the tenth session of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Elaboration of a Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, held in Vienna from 17 to 28 July 2000, announced the existence of related documents on the Internet without mentioning their distribution by traditional methods.

33. It was important to give effect to paragraph 10 of resolution 54/248 D, in which the General Assembly noted with concern the excessively literal translation of some documents issued in Arabic and requested the Secretary-General to ensure that the situation was rectified.

34. The Secretary-General's attention was drawn once again to the need to ensure that the Repertoire of the Practice of the Security Council was translated into the six official languages at the same time, because of its great importance as a reference document of the Security Council.

35. **Ms. Buergo Rodríguez** (Cuba) said that her delegation attached great importance to conference services. With respect to the improved utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi it was happy with the decision taken in resolution 54/248 B to create a permanent interpretation service at the Office by January 2001 and noted the assurances that the service would be operating by that date; it hoped that a report on the status of the recruitment of the necessary staff would be given in the informal consultations.

36. Her delegation reiterated its concern about the late issuance of documents. It acknowledged the efforts made to bring an increasing number of documents out on time but had to draw attention to the delays to the Committee's work caused by that problem and the difficulties entailed for delegations.

37. Turning to the report of the Secretary-General on remote interpretation (A/55/134), she drew attention to the General Assembly resolutions on the question and said that her delegation would take care to continue to ensure that the use of remote interpretation did not become an alternative to the established system until such time as the Assembly took a decision to that effect and that such use did not work to the detriment of the quality of interpretation or lead to any further reduction in the number of language posts, which might endanger the equality of treatment of the official languages of the Organization. The participation of the interpreters in the planned experiment would be of vital importance.

38. Her delegation noted that in its resolution 54/248 B the General Assembly had decided to include in the budget for the next biennium all the resources needed for providing interpretation services for meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States. It would welcome more information on that point, for the Advisory Committee indicated in its report that the Secretariat did not budget specifically for the provision of services for meetings of such groupings.

39. As the representatives of the Secretary-General had informed the Advisory Committee, on the basis of experience in the 1998-1999 biennium temporary assistance funds had been reduced in the proposed programme budget for the next biennium, a move which had given rise to a number of difficulties. Cuba hoped that the General Assembly or the Fifth Committee itself might revise the decisions taken, and it therefore proposed that the question should be kept under review.

40. **Mr. Peixoto** (Brazil) said that his delegation had examined carefully the information submitted by the Secretary-General and the Committee on Conferences concerning conference services at the United Nations Office at Nairobi. Brazil was particularly interested in promoting the Nairobi Office, the only major United Nations centre in a developing country, and considered that the policy for the centre should be based on both cost-effectiveness and affirmative action. It also noted with interest the indications that not only United Nations bodies but also other organizations were interested in the facilities, where meetings not usually held at Nairobi had already taken place during the current year.

41. Since remote interpretation could be a useful and cost-effective tool even in the near future, it was regrettable that the Geneva-Nairobi experiment planned for the first half of 2000 had not taken place. Without questioning the decision to suspend the experiment, given the financial implications, his delegation agreed with the Committee on Conferences that such technology might prove extremely beneficial. It therefore supported the Advisory Committee's request that the Secretariat should clarify the technical issues involved.

42. Brazil welcomed the plans to increase the utilization of the Conference Centre at Bangkok, in particular the formulation of a marketing plan, identification of the periods when the Centre could be made available to eligible organizations, and the active promotion of the Centre to specialized agencies of the United Nations in the region. It also understood the difficulties faced by the Conference Centre at Addis

Ababa in increasing its utilization rate and regarded the list of strategies contained in the Secretary-General's report as extremely useful. The experience gained at other centres, such as Bangkok, could help to solve the problem.

43. **Mr. Yussuf** (United Republic of Tanzania) said that his delegation associated itself with the statement made by the representative of Kenya.

44. **Mr. Jin Yongjian** (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services) thanked delegations on behalf of his Department for their support of its work, which was invisible yet indispensable. The Department would take action on a number of issues raised by delegations, such as the timely issuance of documents, improvement of the quality of interpretation and translation, recruitment of staff to fill the vacancies in the interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, and promotion of the use of conference services at various duty stations. The Department was devising a Secretariat-wide strategy for technical innovation in conference services and new criteria for servicing meetings held away from Headquarters.

45. In the search for solutions to problems not falling within its exclusive competence the Department would collaborate with the Nairobi Office (on the establishment of the permanent interpretation service within the agreed time-frame), with the Office of Human Resources Management (on managed assignments for language staff), and with the Department of Public Information (on the development of the United Nations web sites).

46. Responding to the questions and comments of the representative of Syria, he said that the resolutions of the General Assembly would be published in the Official Records in accordance with the provisions of resolution 54/248 C and that, while delegations were encouraged to make more use of the Internet, the traditional forms of document distribution would continue to be used. He noted in that connection that a questionnaire had been sent to delegations asking them how many printed copies of each document they required.

The meeting rose at 4.25 p.m.